



Lies. Jealousy. Rage. **MURDER.**

a spectator true crime story by jon wells

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scene setter:

Homicide detectives are called to a home on Hamilton's east Mountain after human tissue is found in a garbage bag beside the house. Entering to make sure there isn't someone injured inside, police see smashed furniture, broken dishes. The basement is tidy and clean but there seem to be a lot of flies.

Story has graphic content

chapter two

Catch me if you can

Saturday night
April 3, 1999

Down on Barton Street at the Santa Rosa bar, Vice and Drugs was investigating a suspected shooting.

Detective Ken Weatherill was one of those on the scene combing the bar for shell casings and other evidence. He got a call. Report to Central Station. Must be something big to be pulled off a shooting.

Weatherill was briefed by Detective Sergeant Peter Abi-Rashed. Abi was in charge of the investigation. Body parts found in a garbage bag and box outside of 12 Burns Place. They needed a search warrant application written up for the house, and fast.

A warrant application provides a running narrative of a working investigation, offering an argument to a justice of the peace why police need to conduct a search.

The Vice and Drugs guys do warrants all the time — searching buildings is what they do. Weatherill was considered a pro at it and was parachuted in to Major Crime tonight specifically for that purpose. “Ken, we need the warrant,” Abi-Rashed said. “Get the warrant.”

Weatherill, 36, could pass for Kevin Costner at a glance. He was destined to one day be an inspector with the service. He had a sharp mind and memory. Remembered not only his first day on the job but also his first call on Oct. 14, 1986. Intoxicated person downtown on Mary Street. Night shift, uniform patrol. Later, he served on the tactical emergency team.

He read through Constable Kathy Stewart's notebook, reviewed interview notes. Weatherill was keenly aware that getting a warrant in the early hours of an investigation is crucial. And if you write so much as one misplaced word, a JP could reject it. Or later, a defence lawyer might jump all over it when the case goes to court. They always go after the warrants.

He sat down at a computer and typed into the morning.

It was different back then. Serious business, drug infractions, but there was a relatively harmless ethos to the cat-and-mouse game. It was big news if you arrested someone carrying a knife.

“person of interest” identified in the new case. His name was Sam Pirrera, 32. He lived at 12 Burns Place.

Criminal record data raced across a computer screen from the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC). Pirrera, Samuel Joseph. Theft. Drugs. Assault. “Marks: pig-ura.” (Tattoo of a pig — upper right arm).

The name rang a bell with Abi-Rashed. Took him back to his years before Major Crime, the 1980s, before the suit and tie. Old clothes, working the streets downtown.

Yes. That Sam. He remembered. So, he thought, have you made the big leagues now, Sam?

Abi-Rashed needed to have a face-to-face talk with him downtown.

Summer 1984
Barton Street

Smack-smack-smack-smack-smack. Running shoes slapping pavement, a gang of teenagers running along Barton Street at the sight of an unmarked police car, the game on, again.

The guys that ran with teenage Sam Pirrera, maybe a dozen of them, smoked pot, stole from variety stores. They knew they weren't going to do time for it. They taunted the police.

“I smell bacon!”
“Hey pigs!”

Out of the car jumped a 29-year-old plainclothes Hamilton police officer, his standard-issue Smith & Wesson revolver lodged in a shoulder holster under his jacket. His name was Tarek Peter Abi-Rashed.

He had been on the job just a few years. Peter was born in Egypt, moved to Canada when he was eight. Dad was a mechanical engineer, mom a seamstress.

Peter was a graduate of McMaster University in sociology and geography, but had always wanted to be a cop. Why? Just wanted to kick ass. No — kidding. It might sound hokey, but it was about doing the right thing, taking care of the people who needed it most.

You hear people say, “Why didn't ‘they’ do something to help?” He would be the person who did something. Policing seemed an honourable occupation, an honourable career.

Early '80s, he worked the “special car,” a shift that young cops relished. Dress down, drive around rough parts of town undercover looking for trouble, make arrests. Total freedom of movement. Hit the dark spots, alleyways, bush parties, strip clubs, fly the flag and keep in touch with contacts on the street.

It meant long, late hours, lots of time in court following up on charges. No shortage of action. Abi-Rashed was partnered in the special car back then with Al Jones.

“Hey Starsky! Hutch! Pigs!”
Abi-Rashed and Jones sprinted down the street after Sam Pirrera and his gang. Serious business, drug infractions, but at the same time there was a relatively harmless ethos to the cat-and-mouse game. It was kind of “catch me if you can.” Abi-Rashed thought.

It was different back then. Back in the '80s, it was big news if you arrested someone carrying a knife. You could approach a vehicle knowing that you might end up in a fight, but it would be fist to fist, maybe a bat involved. You didn't have teenagers in gangs that murdered people without giving it a second thought, carried firearms, machetes.

Smack-smack-smack-smack-smack. Peter Abi-Rashed closing ground on Sam and his gang, his big meaty hand grabbing a young shoulder. Sometimes a charge, sometimes a warning, a scolding.

“I'm watching you; don't mess up again. Because I will find you.”

March 4, 1967
Hamilton

The dark eyes took their first peek at the world on Saturday, March 4, 1967. Back then, most babies in Hamilton were delivered at St. Joseph's Hospital, certainly when the parents were Catholic.

That was the case with the new baby's parents, Antonio and Lina Pirrera. They named their first-born son Samuel Joseph.

The body parts found in the bag and box outside the house were laid on an examination table in the Hamilton General Hospital morgue. The parts were all soft tissue, organs, muscle, viscera.

Forensic pathologist Dr. Chitra Rao began her examination. Rao was an expert in the science of murder, and had worked many of Hamilton's highest-profile homicides over the years. As always, her mission was to try to determine such things as the age and sex of the deceased, the cause of death.

But even Rao was up against it trying to tell anything about the victim from the remains in front of her. Gender was a mystery, it was even inconclusive if the victim was an adult or youth.

Forensic anthropologist Shelley Saunders of McMaster University was contacted. But the parts of a body that Saunders would study — bones — were not present.

A forensic pathologist always checks the liver, the heart, to see if death came from natural causes, checks for alcohol-induced liver disease, for example, while also checking for signs of trauma to the organs. But the organs suggested no cause of death to Dr. Rao.

And the remains offered no clue as to the identity of the victim. There were no fingers for rolling prints. It was as though the killer had chosen to extract and separate internal tissues in order to throw off investigators.

DNA testing could ultimately prove gender, but that would take time, submitting samples to the Centre of Forensic Sciences in Toronto. And indeed, in the end all the detectives had to go on to establish identity and cause of death was a DNA test from bits of tissue, the investigation was in big trouble.

The motivation for a killer to dismember varies. It might simply be a crazed mind, he finds perverse pleasure cutting the victim; perhaps is convinced that dismembering will cleanse the victim of an evil spirit. In one case in Florida, the killer cut his victims because he was trying to fulfil an obsession with performing autopsies. Killed his mother, his wife and his niece, dismembered all of them, before taking his own life.

Cutting for no rational reason is termed “offensive mutilation” by forensic psychologists.

In the rare instances of “defensive mutilation,” however, the killer cuts to hide his crime — make it more difficult for police to find the body and establish the victim's identity. Paul Bernardo tried the tactic with one of his victims, unsuccessfully.

Conventional wisdom says that homicide investigators must always find the victim's body to get a conviction. But Abi-Rashed, for one, knew otherwise. He had worked a dismemberment before, the Julie Stanton case in 1994. He was part of the Project Hitchhiker provincial task force investigating her disappearance and death.

In the end, Hamilton's Peter Stark was charged with drugging the Pickering-area teenage girl, murdering her with an axe and dismembering and hiding the body. Police had not recovered the body but Stark was convicted for the crime anyway. It wasn't until after the trial that the body parts were found in a wooded area.

As for the investigation into the parts found at Burns Place, Abi-Rashed knew it was still early in the game. He was

counting on finding the rest of the victim and identifying a crime scene.

Detectives title their white homicide casebooks with the surname of the victim. Abi-Rashed wrote the title of the new case in black ink on the cover. Would have to keep it gender neutral, for now: “J. Doe.”

Abi-Rashed's cellphone rang. It was an officer on the job in the lower city. It was regarding a

The application for a warrant to search the house on Burns Place had to be word-perfect. If it wasn't, a JP could reject it or, much later, a defence lawyer could jump all over it. That's why Peter Abi-Rashed wanted the application done by a smart, experienced cop — someone like Detective Ken Weatherill.

